

# SERVICE-LEARNING MENTORING

FOR HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION AND STUDENT LEADERSHIP





BY CYNTHIA SIMS

**T**he U.S. average freshman graduation rate (percentage of public high school students who graduate on time with a regular diploma) for public schools in 2005-2006 was 73.2 percent<sup>1</sup>. This statistic is very important because research shows that ninth-grade success predicts future retention and graduation; poor academic performance and/or lack of adequate social engagement increase the likelihood of dropping out. Family income is also a major factor in determining high school retention. "In 2007, the event dropout rate (percentage of high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma) of students living in low-income families was about 10 times greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families."<sup>2</sup> So, for many school districts, poorer freshmen are more likely to drop out before they reach their sophomore year.

In order to concentrate intently on the ninth-grade year, some districts have opened schools for ninth-graders, referring to them as ninth-grade academies,<sup>3</sup> and others have started programs like the Freshman Transition Initiative at George Washington University.<sup>4</sup> These are great models for addressing the freshman retention problem; yet, although these initiatives are becoming popular, they are not always feasible or easily replicated. "Schools need to make available to struggling or disengaged students various avenues through which they can experience short-term school success. These include such activities as debates, artistic and performance experiences, and service-learning projects..."<sup>5</sup>

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) recommends service-learning as an effective strategy for increasing students' self-esteem, promoting social development via opportu-

nities to work in teams and collaborate with others, and developing their sense of responsibility. Mentoring is also a highly recommended strategy. The NDPC/N reports the benefits of mentoring to include increased student retention, decreased class skipping, fewer behavior and discipline issues, and improved academic achievement. Service-learning mentoring programs, therefore, can provide the necessary outlet and social support for freshmen, and serve as opportunities for student development, civic engagement and academic success.

The National and Community Service Act of 1993 created the official definition of service-learning, which separates itself from volunteerism because of the reciprocity of the benefits of the service, the focus on learning outcomes and personal development, and its central theme of increasing civic responsibility. The Corporation for National and Community Service was also established by the National and Community Service Act in 1993. This agency provides financial resources and technical support to promote civic engagement in schools and communities. One of its major programs, along with AmeriCorps and Senior Corps, is Learn and Serve America. Learn and Serve America administers the K-12 School-Based Program, which engages students in service-learning initiatives by allocating grants to states, which then provide subgrants to various educational institutions, Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), and other nonprofits.

In 2007, the Illinois Lieutenant Governor's Office provided an opportunity to apply for the K-12 School-Based Learn and Serve Grant. I partnered with Donna Boros, assistant superintendent of the Jackson-Perry Counties Regional Office of Education (currently the acting superintendent), to secure this grant to address the need to enhance the freshman transition experience in its districts. This

was particularly necessary in Jackson and Perry counties, where there were large numbers of low-income families and this placed students in those families at risk for dropping out of high school. In 2007, of the 10,331 total student enrollment for both counties, 43 percent were from families considered low-income, and 80 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The Jackson-Perry Counties Regional Office of Education (ROE) was awarded a two-year \$16,000 grant to offer service-learning curriculum development training for district high school teachers, and to provide resources for implementing the service-learning mentoring programs at their high schools. Two ROE staff—Anne Pierce, staff development specialist and Christy Emery, homeless coordinator—were responsible for managing the grant, recruiting teacher participants, organizing meetings and other administrative support for the grant.

### **Service-Learning Program Planning and Training 2007-2008**

The first year of the grant was used for planning the service-learning mentoring program and providing teacher training. A planning committee was formed and included four high school teachers, three high school students, two middle school students, two ROE staff, and me (as the training consultant). The committee met in fall 2007 to discuss the goals of the grant, ideas for service-learning mentoring programs, and the service-learning training needs of teachers. It was important to get the students' perspectives of mentoring programs, so the high school and middle school student committee members brainstormed with the teachers about the possible topics incoming freshmen would like to explore to assist them with high school transition.

Some of the ideas included learning about teachers' personalities and rigor, best classes to take, most fun extracur-





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ricular activities, and how to navigate the school. They also discussed what high school seniors should know about the freshmen before they began to mentor them and the types of activities mentors and mentees could do together. They believed mentors should know if the mentees enjoyed school, liked social events, and had any hobbies and other interests. Suggestions for activities included playing sports and games together, watching movies, and having lunch at school together.

The ROE recruited district high school teachers to attend a service-learning training in spring 2008. I trained four high school teachers, one ROE staff member and one middle school parent. Topics covered included: the definition of service-learning; the benefits and challenges of service-learning; integrating service-learning into the curriculum while addressing the Illinois Learning Standards (this was a requirement of the grant); developing reflection activities; and evaluating learning outcomes. Training also covered the development of a mentoring program that incorporates

the aspects of service-learning. Teachers discussed classes they could use to offer the mentoring program, when they would offer opportunities for partnering upperclassmen with freshmen, and how they would evaluate the learning outcomes. They were given a list of the ideas from the brainstorming exercise that the planning committee completed. Teachers were also encouraged to seriously consider implementing service-learning mentoring programs in the following school year.

Some teachers planned to begin service-learning mentoring activities within weeks after the training because they were excited about the positive outcomes for all students involved. These three teachers from Trico High School in Campbell Hill, Illinois—Kathy Hammel, business education; Jean Channess, math; and Ron Coleman, math—believed they could begin by partnering the local eighth-grade students (who are housed within the high school) with juniors during homeroom hours to answer questions regarding their upcoming freshman year. Those juniors could then serve as men-

tors during their senior year. At the third planning meeting in late spring 2008, the Trico High School teachers discussed their progress initiating service-learning mentoring activities. They described how they collected questions from eighth-graders and distributed them to four junior homerooms. The juniors then read and researched questions and answers. Some of the juniors then took some time to go to the eighth-graders' homeroom to answer the questions. This was a successful event that allowed the eighth-graders and juniors to introduce themselves and prepare to begin a relationship in the fall 2008 academic year. In the subsequent homeroom periods, the juniors were given the opportunity to reflect on their experience with the eighth-graders, which they found rewarding.

### **Service-Learning Program Implementation 2008-2009**

The three Trico High School teachers officially began their service-learning mentoring program in fall 2008 at the freshman orientation. They provided





PHOTO COURTESY OF ORLAN BROWN, SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER AT MURPHYSBORO HIGH SCHOOL IN MURPHYSBORO, ILLINOIS

▲ Murphysboro High School service-learning mentors are ready at Freshmen Orientation Day. From left to right, Megan Heiple, Ashley McClerren, Hannah Brooks, Bethany Reiman, Ashley Elliott, and Dajia Elliott.

eight seniors with t-shirts that identified them as mentors, and these mentors were introduced to the freshman class. Pizza and drinks were provided, and welcome bags (including highlighters, pens and pencils) were distributed to each freshman. Seniors answered questions the freshmen and their families had, and rapport was established. This event was worthwhile and was a great launch of the service-learning mentoring program. This success, however, was short-lived as the teachers faced challenges to full implementation.

During the school year, the three teachers found it difficult to develop activities and manage the service-learning program due to time constraints. The

original plan to use homeroom time to partner senior mentors with freshman mentees was stunted due to the removal of homerooms and changes in the overall class schedule. Despite this setback, the Trico teachers utilized various strategies to strengthen the service-learning mentoring program.

New eighth-graders were invited to the high school to hear presentations from representatives of school clubs and organizations, which allowed them to become slightly familiar with upperclassmen and extracurricular offerings. Hammel invited me to meet with the junior representatives of these clubs to recruit them to serve as mentors, and to discuss their ideas for a successful mentoring program during

their senior year in the fall of 2009.

Planning committee member Orlan Brown, a social studies teacher at Murphysboro High School in Murphysboro, Illinois, discussed his interest in implementing a service-learning mentoring program in fall 2009. He brought three students to planning meetings to discuss their willingness to serve as mentors and suggest ideas for engaging their classmates in mentoring and creative activities to partner with mentees. They, too, felt strongly that their freshman orientation would be the best forum to begin the program and introduce mentors to incoming freshmen. Brown suggested offering the opportunity to serve as mentors as an option for fulfilling the senior citizenship



requirement in their government classes, which also included reflection assignments.

## Service-Learning Program Operation and Outcomes 2009-2010

Currently, both high schools are operating service-learning mentoring programs. At Murphysboro High School, the "Ask

a Senior" service-learning mentoring program began in fall 2009 on Freshmen Orientation Day. At this kick-off event, senior mentors provided pizza, soft drinks and welcome bags of supplies for the freshmen and signed many of them up for the mentoring program. Later in the fall semester, students held an after-school event that paired mentors with some

mentees for fun activities. During this mixer, the seniors directed games and activities that allowed them to share some interesting facts about themselves and learn about the freshmen. The seniors even provided homemade baked goodies for this event.

For the spring semester, Brown plans to offer a test anxiety workshop led by mentors for the mentees and other fun activities to connect with the freshmen. Senior mentors will be available to participate and help with organizing other events throughout the school year because they are fulfilling the citizenship requirement of their government classes. Brown is satisfied with the level of engagement of his students, especially due to their personal development. He reported "increased maturity and senior leadership development" as outcomes he has witnessed. He also states that he expects to see further self-efficacy as the semester progresses.

On the first day of class in fall 2009, Trico High School senior mentors were reintroduced to the freshman class (those who presented to the eighth-graders in the prior academic year), and they distributed welcome bags to all 79 freshmen. Also, a few days before semester exams, the mentors spoke with the freshmen about what to expect during their exams and how to prepare. Students were required to do reflection journals and submit them to Hammel. Based on these journals, observations and discussions with the mentors, the teachers reported that there were several positive outcomes.

They also identified leadership development and commitment to service as a major outcome for the seniors. Hammel said students continuously asked her, "Are we doing something else [with the freshmen], and what more can we do?" Increased participation in clubs and organizations is a major outcome for freshmen. As the research shows, social engagement is a key factor in preventing high school dropout. Trico teachers are

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Several of the Illinois Learning Standards, particularly the social and emotional standards, and the Illinois Career Development Competencies, were fulfilled via the program. For example, both freshmen and seniors used their interpersonal skills to establish positive relationships, and they developed self-awareness to achieve school success. Further evaluation of the service-learning mentoring programs will reveal the Il-

linois academic learning standards that students demonstrated or enhanced.

Although both programs are successful, there are still challenges. Time is always a factor, especially as teachers are required to utilize more strategies to fulfill No Child Left Behind requirements. Attendance at mentoring events is also a challenge, particularly during sporting seasons. Recommendations for addressing these challenges include utilizing college students as service-learners to help with program operation. In fact, I will be allowing four graduate students to

complete service-learning activities to assist with the overall management of both service-learning programs. Teachers will still lead the program, while graduate students complete duties such as marketing the events and activities, encouraging freshmen to participate, and providing transportation to the after-school mentoring events.

### Enhancing the Freshman Transition

Service-learning mentoring has great potential for preventing high school dropout by enhancing the freshman transition experience. Leadership development, increased civic responsibility and personal growth are other benefits for participants. The ultimate compliment to these programs would be to have freshmen aspire to become mentors themselves. This goal alone would serve as personal motivation for students to stay in school, become senior leaders and serve their peers. ■

### Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education. (2009). "High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 2007." National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved December 16, 2009, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009064.pdf>
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- 3 Chmelynski, C. (2004). "Ninth-grade Academics: Keep Kids in School." *Education Digest*, 69(5), 48-50.
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- 5 Neild, R.C., Baltanz, R., & Herzog, L. (2007). "An Early Warning System." *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 28-33.

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